

Year Round Gardening

Aspen Trees

By Debra Stinton Othitis, Colorado Master Gardener

Quaking or trembling aspen is a short lived (50 years), fast growing, medium sized tree. It seldom exceeds 60 feet in height and 20 inches in diameter. Although it has some good ornamental characteristics including trembling leaves, light-colored bark and its adaptation to a wide variety of sites, its root sprouting habit discourages widespread use for shade or ornamental planting. Aspen trees can be a supermarket for insects and diseases. Some of the challenges are listed here with references to more detailed control.

AILMENTS AFFECTING LEAVES

Aphids are small insects that feed by sucking plant sap from leaves and excrete a sweet, sticky substance called honeydew. The damage is mostly unsightly but may kill the branches they feed on in the long-term. Contact insecticides and soaps are useful when aphids are exposed on leaves. <https://static.colostate.edu/client-files/csfs/pdfs/aphids.pdf>.

Aspen are susceptible to leaf spot caused by different fungi which develop readily in wet, cool weather. This can decrease a tree's aesthetic value and cause premature defoliation. Severe outbreaks can affect tree growth, cause premature defoliation or dieback of parts of the tree, and reduce defense capabilities of the tree. Some fungi causing leaf spots are Marssonina, Septoria and Ciborinia. A timely application of fungicide can prevent severe outbreaks of leaf spot.

<http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/aspen-and-poplar-leaf-spots-2-920/>

Photo courtesy of Debra Othitis



AILMENTS AFFECTING TRUNKS

The aspen borer is a wood boring beetle which lays eggs on the bark of aspen trees. The beetle larvae bore into aspen wood, weakening it and easing the start of fungal infections. This is best controlled by maintaining vigorous tree health or use of chemicals while eggs are being laid. <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/insects/shade-tree-borers-5-530/>

Aspen cankers do not always cause tree mortality, but may slow tree development. These cankers (wounds) are caused by a fungal infection, most commonly *Cytospora*. To manage the disease, reduce stress on trees, use resistant plants, remove infected limbs, clean wounds and prune properly. <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/cytospora-canker-2-937/>

Oystershell scale develops on the bark of many common trees and shrubs and can cause serious injury during outbreaks. Oystershell eggs typically hatch in late May or early June and the active 'crawlers' that emerge move about to find new sites to feed. Sprays applied when the crawlers are present can be very effective in controlling oystershell scale. <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/insects/oystershell-scale-5-513/>

KEEPING YOUR ASPEN HEALTHY

It is important to maintain a proper watering schedule for aspen as they suffer from over- or under-watering. Unwanted aspen sprouts that appear in the lawn may be mowed, but do NOT spray the sprouts, as they are connected to the mother tree. Other preventative measures include: avoiding wounding the main trunk with mowers or weed wackers; trimming out cankers that are less than half the circumference of the aspen; and cleaning up heavy scale-insect infestations.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research based answers. Get answers to your horticultural questions at ask.extension.org or by contacting a Colorado Master Gardener Volunteer at 520-7684 or emailing CSUmg2@elpasoco.com. Volunteers are available to help you Monday through Thursday from 9:00 to noon.